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ABSTRACT

In April, 1991, Timothy McGuire, a third year student at Georgetown University Law Center, published an article in the Georgetown Weekly Law Review entitled "Admissions Apartheid," which accused the admissions office at Georgetown of admitting minority students who were less qualified than white students. The analysis provided in this paper shows that using the media as a tool to convey emotionally charged ideas will elicit strong responses from the audience. The more emotionally charged a journalistic piece is, the more likely the audience will be either to conform to the ideas presented, or to react in a highly vocal, negative manner. Likewise, the more personally involved the audience is with the issue presented, the less likely they will be to conform to the message presented. The McGuire article divided the Georgetown community and stirred much emotional debate. However, examination of reactions to the article show that it had little chance of being supported by its audience because of the message it presented, and because the audience already had several preconceived ideas about the subject matter. (SR)

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# Audience Reaction To Emotional Issues: A Case Study Of Affirmative Action at Georgetown University Law Center

Presented by
Donna W. Cunningham

On April 8, 1991, Timothy McGuire, a third year student at Georgetown Law Center, brought the issue of affirmative action to the attention of all Georgetown administrators and students. Mr. McGuire published an article in the Georgetown Weekly Law Review entitled, "Admissions Apartheid", which accused the admissions office at Georgetown of admitting minority students who were less qualified than white students. The hostile environment created by this article was overwhelming. In the first few days after it's publication, this story divided and impacted the Georgetown community severely. McGuire's article stirred such emotional debate that a closer examination of his rhetoric needs to be explored.

Through this analysis it will be shown that using the media as a tool to convey emotionally charged ideas will elicit strong responses from the audience. Before undertaking an analysis of the McGuire article, it is first necessary to explore the media and the effect it can have on audiences. The basic premise is that the more emotionally charged a journalistic piece is, the more likely the audience will either conform to the ideas presented, or will react in a highly



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vocal, negative manner. Likewise, the more personally involved the audience is with the issue presented, the less likely they will be to conform to the message presented. After an analysis of the effects of media on audiences, this paper will then turn to the Mcguire article to discuss the effect it had on the Georgetown student body. The contention of this paper is that McGuire's article had little chance of being supported by its audience because of the message it presented, and because the audience already had several preconceived ideas about the subject matter.

## BACKGROUND ON THE MCGUIRE INCIDENT

While working as a clerk in the Georgetown Law Center's admissions office, Tim McGuire was allowed access to student and applicant files. McGuire conducted an informal survey of all files to explore the racial stratification of all applicants. Through this survey he found that African American students scored significantly lower on the law school entrance exam (LSAT), and their overall grade point averages (GPA) were lower than their white counterparts. According to Mr. McGuire, "75 out of 97 black applicants had Law School Admissions Test scores below 35 (out of 50), as opposed to less than one-sixth of white applicants." (1991) McGuire continues and states "There was also a significant difference between black and white GPA's. Black acceptee's GPAs average approximately 3.2; whites averaged 3.7" (1991). McGuire blames academia for

these differences. He suggests that because emphasis is placed on cultural and racial diversity in higher education, the academic achievement of minority students is not emphasized as much as the performance of whites. He suggests that the problem is not unique to law schools, but rather, "The biggest problem is that in every area and at every level of postsecondary education black achievements are far inferior to those of whites" (1991).

Finally, McGuire examines a variety of predominantly black undergraduate schools and states that African American LSAT scores were consistently lower than white scores. He states that at Howard, Hampton, Jackson State College and Grambling, at least fifty five percent of all students taking the test scored between 0 and 19 points [out of a possible score of 48] (1991).

After publication, the McGuire article set off a wave of hostility. Students mobilized, the Student Bar Association condemned his actions, and the administration recommended he be brought before the conduct council at Georgetown. The article also gained national recognition, with interviews and editorial pieces appearing in all major newspapers and on all national television networks. The outcry against McGuire was based on the issue of the right to privacy. Many people felt that, even though McGuire had not revealed any students names, the mere fact that he would publish what was thought to be private information from applicant's files was enough to warrant his

dismissal from the university. The public however, also called for the university to respond to these allegations. Many students were extremely upset that the university could have what the students thought to be such a biased policy. The student body was also upset by the fact that their achievements were not measured solely in terms of academic merit, but were also based on intangible variables that they could not control.

## EFFECTS OF THE MEDIA

The media play an enormous role in shaping and reinforcing public attitudes. Lasorsa and Wanta (1990) state that the more an individual is personally involved with the particular issue brought forth by the media, the less likely that person will conform to the media's message. Audiences do, in fact, turn to the media for reinforcement of their existing ideas. Likewise, the more the individual was exposed to the message from the media, the more likely they would be to conform to the message. Lasorsa and Wanta also state that their findings support the idea that the press has an agenda in place, and that this agenda drives the public's agenda (1990).

It seems logical to conclude that audiences are affected by the media. Direct exposure to printed or spoken words provides information and a forum for discussion of ideas. Likewise, the opinion of Lasorsa and Wanta (1990) that audiences tend to seek out information that is consistent with

their own views also seems to be rational. The fact that audiences read information that is important to them, and tend to overlook information that is not would tend to be sound analysis. The McGuire article though, can be analyzed by the primary point of the article by Lasorsa and Wanta. The more personally involved a person is with an issue, the less likely they will be to conform to the message presented. When looking at McGuire's audience--notably Georgetown law students--it would appear that most, if not all of them would have some opinion of affirmative action at Georgetown. It would also seem that the audience would have an opinion about the minimum requirements which are necessary to be admitted into Georgetown. Thus, the chances of the audience being complacent and not reacting to the McGuire article would seem highly unlikely.

Streckfuss (1990) argues that empirically, objectivity in journalism has undergone a transformation. He states that objectivity was born from the idea that humans could not rationally be objective, and therefore, the media needed to present both sides of the issue fairly and with solid justification. The reasons that humans should receive objectivity in journalism are explained through a variety of rationales. First, humans, by nature, tend to gather facts before making judgements. Also is the idea that even if humans gather these facts, propagandists exist which will attempt to manipulate and taint information. Streckfuss concludes with

the opinion that today's journalist is bound by a greater need to sell newspapers than he is to search for true objectivity. McGuire may have been guilty of lack of objectivity in his article by presenting such a one-sided analysis of affirmative action. And since humans do gather facts before making opinions (Streckfuss, 1990), the uproar of the audiences would seem to be an expected response. The opinions of the students had already been formed with regard to affirmative action, and these opinions were the direct opposite of the thesis of the McGuire article. While students were generally under the impression that their admission was based on prior merit, the McGuire article implied that admission was based on a racial standard that disregarded academic success. It is therefore necessary to look further into the audiences response to determine why their reaction was so overwhelmingly negative.

## AMERICAN VALUES

While an analysis of the media is important to determine how it reinforces public attitudes, it is equally important to examine the value structures which guide the public in decision making. According to Steele and Redding (1962), there are numerous values in American society which are shared by most people. These values can be observed, and are useful tools for senders of messages to use when trying to persuade audiences. These values include: puritan and pioneer morality, the value

of the individual, achievement and success, change and progress, ethical equality, equality of opportunity, effort and optimism, rejection of authority, and external conformity (1962). Steele and Redding state that:

> The concepts of culture and cultural values (premises) are, indeed, intellectual abstractions, but they refer to real behavior. More to the point, they refer to a type of behavior that any rhetorical theoretician or critic cannot afford to ignore" (1962 p.83)

This theory of cultural value systems, can be directly applied to the McGuire article. Because of the values Americans place in high regard, McGuire was able to illicit strong emotions from all audiences, and was able to get his audience to react to these emotions. Race relations and affirmative action in general are also such emotionally charged issues in today's society that it was easy for McGuire to get a very strong reaction from his article.

## RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

McGuire's article envoked a very emotional response from his audience. This would suggest that the audience had some type of opinion about affirmative action at the time the article was published. A closer analysis of audience values needs to be done therefore, to determine why they reacted in the manner they did.

Puritan and pioneer morality suggests that Americans wish to view the world in terms of good or bad, or ethical and

unethical (Steele and Redding, 1962). I believe McGuire's article succeeded in polarizing his audience in just such a way. By simply viewing LSAT and GPA scores of applicants, and not all of the variables Georgetown uses in the admissions process, he was able to divide people's opinions immediately. Students began to view the administration as evil or unethical because of the biased standards they employed. Likewise, the students' opinions of McGuire began to polarize, many people determining that he was evil or immoral, or supporting him by stating that he had brought the issue to light and therefore was performing a needed task.

Steele and Redding also suggest that Americans highly value the individual (1962). Personal achievement is regarded as a positive trait, and each person should be measured on their own merits. McGuire (1991) brought to the forefront the value of the individual by categorizing all students into two camps: black and white. No longer were people individuals, but rather they were labeled because of their race. This lead to feelings of betrayal on the part of the students. When their identity was taken away, the students were left feeling their individual successes were no longer important. As a result, the students reacted in a negative manner, displaying their outrage at McGuire and his findings.

Closely related to the value of the individual is the importance of achievement and success (Steele and Redding, 1962). As stated above, the success that individuals enjoy is

of primary importance, and when individuals feel that this part of their identity is taken away, they feel cheated. This is exactly what the McGuire (1991) article did. No longer were the achievements of the students important. All of their accomplishments, according to McGuire, were overshadowed by their race, for it was their race that was the most important admissions variable.

Steele and Redding (1962) also state that change and progress are important to Americans. All of the pride Americans have in the strides they have taken towards racial equality was suddenly challenged by McGuire. McGuire's article threatened this value by implying that African Americans were not achieving equality in academics. Americans hold in high regard the idea that we are slowly changing and evolving into a society where all people can achieve the same success, and McGuire's article attempted to make clear that we have not come that far. His audience was left feeling that change and progress were not occurring in academia, and therefore, they reacted negatively.

Ethical equality, equality of opportunity, and effort and optimism are also values that Americans have high regard for (Steele and Redding, 1962). McGuire's article threatened all of these values when he stated "This year perhaps 50,000 people took the LSAT; only those whites among the top 7,500 were seriously considered for admission by our law school, but blacks needed only to be in the top 21,000 to have a strong

chance of acceptance." (1991) What this suggests is the students were confronted with the idea that equality was not an issue in acceptance procedures, and therefore all of the effort and optimism they had exerted to get into one of the nation's top law schools was nullified. They had no longer gotten to law school on their own, but rather there were mechanisms outside of their control that were guiding their achievements.

Steele and Redding (1962) state that Americans also reject authority in their value structures. The McGuire article may have given them the opportunity to do just that. The authoritarian structure of the law school was challenged because the students felt the administration was imposing admissions standards on them that they were not aware of. The students rebelled against the administrators at the Georgetown Law Center, because they were perceived as having adopted standards that were the antithesis of the student's values.

Finally, Steele and Redding (1962) state that external conformity is a value that American have high regard for. Americans desire to be like others and want to conform to universally accepted standards. At the heart of Mr. McGuire's article is the idea that minorities at Georgetown Law Center, specifically African Americans, cannot conform because they were not academically equal to begin with. Students may have felt threatened by the idea that they would always feel unequal while pursuing their law degrees because, according to Mr. McGuire, their admissions standards in the beginning were

unequal.

## CONCLUSIONS

This analysis is not to suggest that Mr. McGuire was correct, or that his statistical methodology used for these conclusions was valid. Rather, it is designed to promote an understanding of the audience's reaction to his analysis. By examining the content of McGuire's article, as well as the reactions of the students at Georgetown, we can begin to understand the impact that the media can have on audiences. We can also begin to realize how audiences perceive information once they are emotionally involved with the issue.

Further analysis may be done in the field of persuasion determine exactly when issues become too emotionally charged to be persuasive. If it is the case that the McGuire article was too sensitive of an issue, which issues are neutral enough to warrant attitudinal changes in audiences? Likewise, what is the probability that emotional issues will persuade any audience member? These questions could help to strengthen the arguments put forth in this analysis, and could also be invaluable to others in the field of persuasion.

It would seem that McGuire's article succeeded in stirring up a variety of emotions from the student body and the general public. People took sides on the issue and called for explanations from McGuire and Georgetown. Likewise, students

felt betrayed because they felt that the university was concealing information from them that had a direct bearing on their academic achievement. Based on Steele and Redding's (1962) analysis, these reactions were in keeping with the value structures that Americans cherish. Once these values are challenged, the public will be persuaded to react.

Though Steele and Redding's (1962) article was written almost thirty years ago, it is interesting that the thesis behind the American value system has not changed. The student body, the administration of Georgetown, and the general public were all affected by McGuire's message in one way or another, whether it be in a positive form or a negative form. Obviously, the majority of the audience reacted negatively based on their previously held opinions. By exposing the actions of Georgetown Law Center, McGuire was successful in proving that the values of Americans still play an critical role in determining reactions to persuasive messages.

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